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National
Home Center News

SECOND CLASS

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Dealers discover customer service pays off

Headquarters staffs hit the sales floor to sound out customers, employees

By Elizabeth Brent

INTERNATIONAL REPORT — Officials at Ernst Home & Nursery in Seattle wanted to get better input about how its 70 stores were running. So, on March 7, they switched places with store managers, a move that will occur from now on every quarter.

News Analysis

Customer focus groups told Busy Beaver that the quality of its stores' lumber was poorer than its competitors'. So, said company president Chuck Bender, the 13-unit Pittsburgh chain recently instituted a weekly culling system to pick out some of the junkier pieces.

After visiting his Mission Hills, Calif., store and conversing with an employee, Jesse Ruf, the ceo of Neiman-Reed's Lumber City in Van Nuys, Calif., discovered he might have to add another truck to accommodate its popular free delivery service.

Within months of appointing its first director of consumer services, England's Payless DIY chain changed its stores' signage and access routes, and instituted new training and management programs.

Both here and abroad, retailers are taking steps to improve dramatically their stores' customer service, mostly by making employees and, in some cases, upper level management, more responsive to consumers' needs.

Increasingly, that has meant headquarters officials getting out from behind their desks and into the stores more to take the pulse of their employees and customers.

"The best way for me to keep in touch with my employees is to be in the stores," said Ruf, who visits two stores a day. "There's no substitute."

"[In] the end we're all about customers, because without customers we don't have a business and our jobs," added Jim Hodkinson, ceo of England's leading home center chain, the 240-unit B&Q. "The nearer we get to customers and our staff, the better our business will be."

(Continued on page 81)

HomeClub ceo quits; cites management 'ambiguity'

By Brad Altman

FULLERTON, Calif. — Sean F. Lee departed HomeClub in April after a nine-month tenure as president and ceo of the 52-unit warehouse home center chain based here.

Herb Zarkin, the ceo of HomeClub from mid-1985 until his reassignment to parent Zayre Corp. headquarters in Framingham, Mass., in early 1988, "will fill in as acting president but there will be a search for a replacement," a Zayre spokeswoman said.

Lee's replacement is expected to hold the coo title and will report to ceo Zarkin. Zarkin in turn will report to John Levy, the top executive in charge of HomeClub and BJ's Wholesale Club, a Zayre-owned East Coast general merchandise chain. Both are scheduled to be spun off from Zayre in May or June.

In a telephone interview with *NHCN*, Lee said his decision to leave HomeClub April 7 resulted from "an ambiguity of management. Both Herb [Zarkin] and I were trying to

(Continued on page 6)

Lowe's prototype features self service in a 'bigger box'

By Tom Bagsarian

BOONE, N.C. — It's a self service world out there. And Lowe's latest prototype, which will carry the chain into the next decade, is adapting to it.

Higher ceilings, more commodities on the showroom floor, better signage, broader product assortments. These are some of the features that distinguish Lowe's 40,000-square-foot store here from its more traditional outlets. The unit opened in March just 30 miles west of the 296-unit chain's headquarters in North Wilkesboro, N.C.

"It's simply a bigger box in terms of ceiling and floor space," said Cliff Oxford, Lowe's vp-corporate relations.

It's also Lowe's future. The industry's biggest retailer will open 30 of these stores this year, including 60,000-square-foot versions in larger markets. Eighteen will replace existing units, just as the one here did, and 12 will open in new locations. Plans call for Lowe's to have 308 stores by the end of 1989.

Lowe's prototype unit in Boone, N.C., will still stress customer service with a desk at the front entrance. NHCN photo

(Continued on page 83)

SELLING PROJECTS

KITCHEN AND BATH

Kitchen and bath remodeling is expected to level off in 1989. But that hasn't stopped home improvement retailers from expanding their K&B departments, and by adding a number of other categories—millwork, linens, etc.—to their project marketing. The sale of these projects is being revolutionized by the availability and lower cost of computer-aided design systems, which many retailers are taking on in their stores.

U.S. lumber dealers accuse Canada of trade hanky panky

By Gary S. Ruderman

NATIONAL REPORT — Friction continues between U.S. and Canadian lumber suppliers over alleged lumber smuggling and so-called non-tariff barriers on certain plywood.

In testimony before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on International Trade, a U.S. organization charged that some Canadian suppliers are evading taxes.

Larry Broderick, president of Rivendell Forest Products in Colorado and spokesman for a group seeking to enforce Canada's lumber export tax, alleged Canadian wholesalers are evading taxes by hoodwinking customs inspectors.

In the same hearing on the Canadian Free Trade Act in April, the American Plywood Association (APA) called for a continuation of the 20 percent U.S. tariff on Canadian imports because Canada continues to hamper sales of U.S. D-grade and Southern pine veneer plywood.

Broderick said wholesalers in Canada regularly label shipments as coming from provinces where there is no tax when in

(Continued on page 81)

NEWSBREAKS

SUTHERLAND LUMBER IS SAID TO PURSUE CENTRAL HARDWARE: *NHCN* has learned from sources familiar with both companies that a faction within the Kansas City, Mo.-based Sutherland has expressed interest in purchasing the 38-unit Central, which has been put on the block by its parent, Interco.

Sutherland is said to be competing for Central with Handy Andy Home Improvement Centers, the Schaumburg, Ill.-based retailer which sources said has also eyed Central for possible acquisition.

INDUSTRY UPDATE

Vila close to signing new TV deal

NEW YORK — Bob Vila could soon be back on TV again.

The former star of "This Old House" reportedly is close to signing a deal to host a nationally syndicated home repair program that, according to Vila's lawyer, could garner ad support from such companies as Andersen Window, Glidden, Peachtree, Pella, Kohler and Delta Faucet.

Advertising Age, in its April 17 issue, quotes attorney Ronald Feiner as saying that his client, Vila, has been "inundated" with offers after his contract for "This Old House" was not renewed by public TV station WGBH in Boston (*NHCN*, April 24).

The station was displeased with the number of companies Vila was endorsing, and reacted to complaints by The Home Depot and other home center chains sponsoring its show regionally about Vila's appearing in ads for Rickel Home Centers. Home Depot pulled sponsorship of the show in 17 markets, which has totaled $500,000 to date, said *Ad Age*.

L-P exec receives NAWLA award

TUCSON, Ariz. — Harry A. Merlo, chairman and president of Louisiana-Pacific, is the recipient of the 1989 John J. Mulrooney Memorial Award from the North American Wholesale Lumber Association (NAWLA).

Honored for his service to the forest products industry, his service to the community and society, Merlo received the award April 18 at the NAWLA annual meeting here.

Merlo, 64, was an architect of the spin-off of Louisiana-Pacific from Georgia-Pacific in 1973. Over the last 16 years, he has guided L-P as the firm's sole president and ceo as it has grown to more than $2 billion in sales.

Dexter recalls door deadbolts

AUBURN, Ala. — Dexter Lock Co. has announced a voluntary recall of its Dexter deadbolt door locks manufactured beween April 1, 1988 and October 31, 1988.

The company announced a number of deadbolts manufactured during that time contain a pin which may break, causing the deadbolt to remain locked. Dexter said it would replace the locks free of charge.

Consumers who bought the Dexter deadbolt or had it installed after March 31, 1988 should call Dexter at 1-800-637-3638 to arrange replacement.

STOR set to debut first mall store

CITY OF INDUSTRY, Calif. — STOR, the contemporary home furnishings retailer launched in 1987 by former Ole's Home Center ceo Harvey G. Knell, plans its third outlet, a 180,000-square-foot retail warehouse facility to open this summer in a new wing of Del Amo Fashion Center in Torrance.

This is the first time STOR has located one of its giant outlets in a shopping mall. Del Amo is the largest enclosed shopping center in Los Angeles County. The other freestanding STOR locations are in City of Industry and Tustin.

The privately held STOR, which features European-style home furnishings and is similar to IKEA on the East Coast, "is running ahead of its sales projections" said a company statement. No sales or profit figures were disclosed.

K mart's first sports store opens

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — K mart's first Sports Giant—a new warehouse-style membership sporting goods format—opened April 6 in Madison Heights, Mich. A second Detroit market Sports Giant will open in Livonia, Mich., in May. It is being developed by Builders Square.

The first, 50,000-square-foot warehouse features an assortment of hardlines, apparel and footwear. Anybody may shop at Sports Giant, but unrestricted memberships are available at $10 per family, offering prices 5 to 10 percent lower than non-member prices.

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Interco willing to lower asking price for Central Hardware unit

By an NHCN staff editor

ST. LOUIS — With just 90 days to raise an estimated $380 million to $420 million, Interco, the $2 billion conglomerate here, reportedly is willing to accept a bid lower than its $312 million asking price for its 39-unit Central Hardware home center chain.

Sources report the price Interco wants for Central, which has been published previously, is "on its way down. Interco "might be in store for some surprises" if the corporation thinks Central will sell for $312 million, a senior industry source said. Central just underwent a yearlong remerchandising of its stores.

No one contacted by *NHCN* could place a price tag on Central and Witte Hardware Co., a St. Louis hardlines wholesaler carried on Central's books. The last investment firm to follow Interco, Newhart Cook in St. Louis, has stopped its coverage of the company's stock, said analyst Lawrence Day.

Interco, which reported disastrous year-end sales April 10, must pay $600 million to a consortium of banks Aug. 7 as partial repayment of $1.95 billion in debt it took for a recapitalization plan. The publicly traded Interco took on the debt last November to thwart a hostile takeover attempt by the Rales Brothers of Washington, D.C.

As part of its asset sale financing agreement, Interco was reluctantly willing to part with its Ethan Allen furniture division for an estimated $600 million to $1 billion (*NHCN*, Oct. 17, 1988). But the sale never took place, according to Ethan Allen management.

In fact, Interco sold only two of the 16 companies it announced were for sale last year: it got $42 million for the Biltwell apparel company of St. Louis and $178 million for its Londontown (London Fog) label of Eldersburg, Md.

Interco was loathe to place retailer Central and wholesaler Witte Hardware Co. on the block. But when other asset sales fell through, Central came up as a prime candidate with Ethan Allen.

(Continued on page 83)

Dail leaves HQ Warehouse in the midst of expansion plans

By an NHCN staff editor

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. — David Dail, former vp and general merchandise manager of Home Quarters Warehouse, joined The Home Depot on April 17.

Dail became the Atlanta chain's merchandiser of lumber and building materials for the Northeast division and reports to Denis Ryan, vp-merchandising for this region.

"I believe it's a good career opportunity," said Dail. "Home Depot is a dynamic company and *the* leader in the industry."

Dail resigned from Home Quarters on March 30 and his departure comes at a time when that chain is accelerating its expansion to double its store count over the next two years.

Neither Home Quarters nor its parent company, Hechinger, was available for comment.

Dail had been with Home Quarters since the concept was developed by W.R. Grace in Oct. 1984. After the company was purchased by an investment group headed by Bernard Kosser and Frank Doczi in the fall of 1985, Dail, along with other executives in the company, became minority stockholders. He continued with the company after its purchase by Hechinger in Feb. 1988.

Dail's experience in the home center industry includes positions with Lowe's, the North Wilkesboro, N.C., chain, where he spent over nine years and West Building Materials, which he left in 1984 as vp-merchandising.

"We're always looking for the very very best people in our industry. We think David fits that description," said Jim Inglis, executive vp-merchandising for The Home Depot.

BE remains intact as Wickes' owners ponder investor deals

By Brad Altman

LOS ANGELES — Builders Emporium is the only remaining retail chain that the new owners of Wickes Cos. have not yet divested following the corporation's agreement to sell Orchard Supply Hardware to an investment group that included Orchard's management.

Informed sources indicate the 120-unit BE chain could be sold to BE management with the help of outside investors. Similar approaches were used in the decisions to sell 31-unit Orchard and 23-unit Wickes Furniture.

"There is no question that BE management would like to do what OSH did," one source said. However, a second source said BE "management can't raise the money" to mount a deal.

McNulty bid 'too low'

A group headed by industry veteran Bob McNulty made a bid for Irvine, Calif.-based BE (*NHCN*, March 27), but it "was too low," McNulty said. "We haven't withdrawn our offer, but they want a higher price."

John Kutler, a Wickes board member and principal in the Century City, Calif., offices of Wasserstein Perella Partners L.P., was not available for comment. Earlier he had said that the divestitures of BE, OSH and Wickes Furniture "could close by early May."

An investor group including the management of OSH led by president and ceo Maynard Jenkins, signed a definitive agreement April 12 to purchase the San Jose, Calif.-headquartered chain from Wickes for $134 million, including assumed debt and other obligations.

(Continued on page 81)

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Photos by: Chuck Slade.

wastes too much of my time waiting with people who don't know what they want," said Robert Alden, remodeling contractor based in Patchogue, N.Y. "I am constantly here picking up building materials."

The contractor sales counter connects with the lumber sales counter in the store and the contractors have a separate entry into the showroom.

General has also expanded locks, power tools and heavier hardware to meet the needs of the trade. The store's focus remains narrowly defined with an estimated total of 8,000 items.

"We stocked the store as much with an eye to the contractor trade as the consumer," said Bob DiAntonio, branch manager at Medford.

At a pre-opening ceremony on March 17, stockholders, bankers, vendors and contractors rubbed shoulders as General departed from the traditional opening by honoring the 250 volunteer firemen who fought the blaze.

Meltzer unveiled a plaque to the firefighters in the presence of Bill Hart, chief of the Medford fire department, and John Masem, assistant chief. This will remain permanently on display in the store.

Standing in the bright new building it is hard to imagine the fierceness of the fire which destroyed the original 8,000-square-foot store and adjoining 50,000 square foot warehouse for more than $4.5 million in damages. The glass block walls of the main office just 15 feet from the store cracked with the intense heat. Amazingly, the building where the company's main computers are remained untouched.

Kitchen and bath vignettes demand large space investment of dealers

By Brad Altman

NATIONAL REPORT — Home improvement dealers are responding to the increasing demand among DIYers and professional tradesmen alike for kitchen and bath products by expanding their lines and the amount of floor space dedicated to their display.

Millwork, lighting, skylights, paint, and other products are beginning to make their way into display areas next to kitchens and baths as part of the larger project marketing (*see other story*). Consequently, dealers have found they simply need more space to accommodate this merchandising effort.

Underscoring the growing interest in this booming market, Diamond Lumber is making an unprecedented commitment to the kitchen category in three stores located in Fresno, Calif., Lenexa, Kan., and West Hartford, Conn.

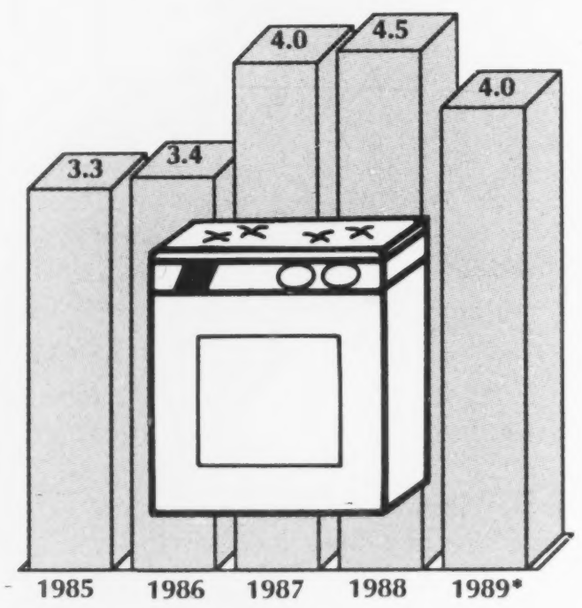
Diamond Lumber president Jerry Grubstein said the chain is testing whether such emphasis on kitchens can be justified from a return-on-investment standpoint. In Fresno, for instance, fully one-third of the 23,000-square-foot store is devoted to 12 kitchen vignettes as well as related millwork products.

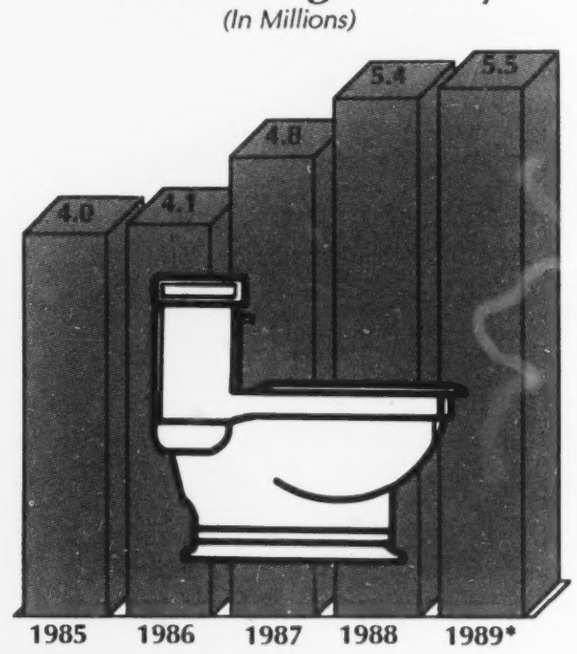
Other dealers are moving more boldly into showcasing these products, and in many cases are well ahead of their chain counterparts in kitchen and bath displays. Retailers such as two-unit Lumbermen's in Palm Springs, Calif., and single-unit Eastern Lumber Co., Amesbury, Mass., are reporting success with freestanding kitchen and bath outlets that are physically separated from their regular showroom sales floor.

Since late 1987, Eastern Lumber has operated a 12,000-square-foot freestanding kitchen and bath center, which contributes about 10 percent of the company's $14 million sales. To garner even greater volume, the center has been expanded to 18 full-line kitchens from 12.

Lumbermen's Building Center in the California desert continues to see robust sales generated at its 1,600-square-foot freestanding kitchen center located adjacent to the flagship store's main showroom.

Alice Slettedahl, Lumbermen's kitchen specialist, said the retailer finds that its kitchen and bath sales are overwhelmingly focused on the kitchen remodeling arena. Consequently, there are 12 kitchen vignettes but only two bathroom vanity displays.





*projections

Source: National Kitchen & Bath Association NHCNChart

Kitchen and bath remodeling will level off temporarily in 1989, according to data compiled by the National Kitchen and Bath Association. However, NKBA's executive director Francis Jones foresees long-term annual growth of between 8 and 10 percent.

Indeed, even more optimism about the strength of the market was detailed in a fall, 1988, Simmons study entitled "U.S. Profile of the DIY Consumer" which found that 6 percent of all U.S. adults—or 1,215,000—had engaged in remodeling their bathrooms in the previous 12 months; 4.52 percent had redone their kitchens.

Showing higher-end products

Hayward Lumber, a seven-unit retailer headquartered in Salinas, Calif., also separates its Home Design Centers—which specialize in kitchen and bath—from its full-line home centers.

"The faucets we show in our Home Design Centers sell for $281," explained kitchen cabinet division manager Dan Peterson. "We don't want to merchandise them in our regular showroom next to $49.95 faucets."

Peterson said the regular showrooms have limited selling space and sometimes, in an effort to "make efficient use of space," might "place toilet seats right next to a kitchen vignette. That is not appealing."

Even retailers that have severe space shortages are finding ways to expand their kitchen and bath departments.

At two-unit, contractor-oriented Burt Building Materials Corp. in Huntington, N.Y., vp John Marino said a kitchen and bath department will be added to an existing 3,000-square-foot store in Huntington Station later this year. Another Burt Building Materials store on a one-acre site is being expanded but won't have a kitchen and bath department. Customers wanting those products will be referred to the Huntington Station outlet located three miles away, Marino explained.

Single-unit Timbermart, a 25,000-square-foot home center in Seabrook, N.H., has increased its kitchen and bath emphasis "dramatically" since opening a new store a year ago, Ann Lynch, kitchen designer, said. Timbermart has 22 full kitchens compared with seven kitchens in the old store. There are also 20 bath vignettes, Lynch added.

Timbermart decided to make the commitment to this category because of its "higher profit" potential than less service-sensitive departments such as hardlines, Lynch said.

For many independents, these showrooms are designed specifically as places where their professional clients can take homeowners to see kitchens and baths in "real" settings.

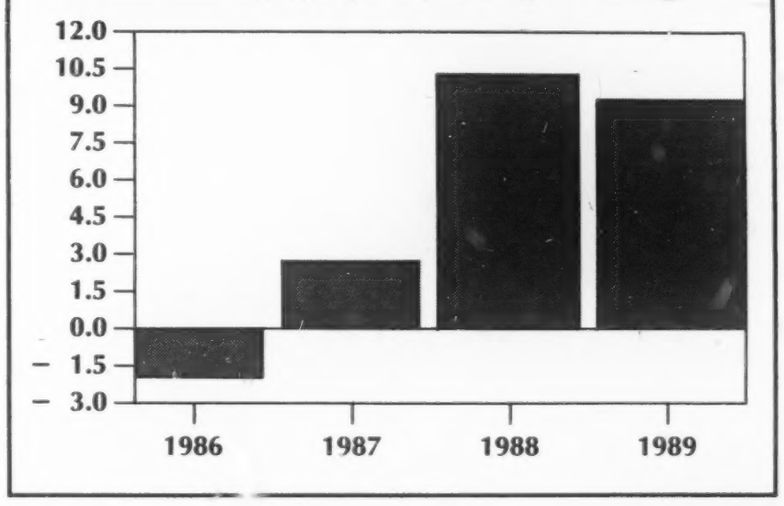
Curt Gomes, Diamond's western district manager, said the kitchen and bath department his chain is adding to three stores is intended to appeal to professional builders and remodelers, who are key Diamond customers. Nearby are meeting rooms for contractors to discuss projects with their customers.

The vignette approach will let "customers see how the products are going to look in their homes," Diamond's Grubstein said. Most of the selling floor is devoted to millwork, moldings, doors and windows, kitchen and bath; only 25 percent is devoted to hardlines.

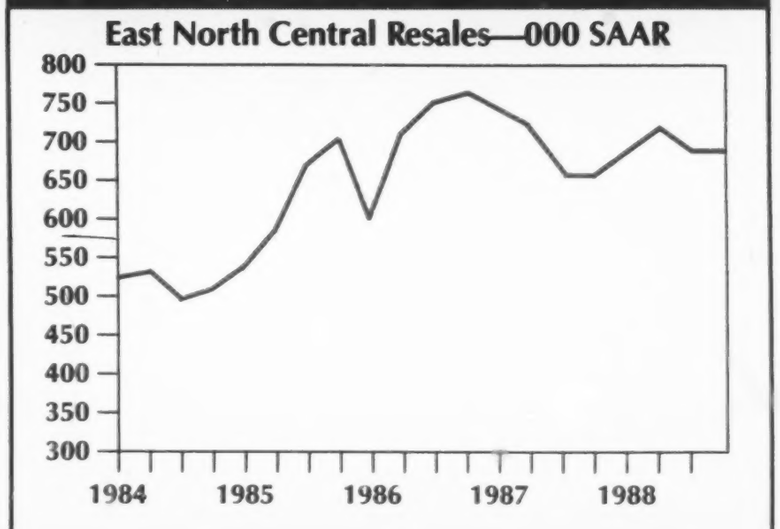
Business Watch

Section 4

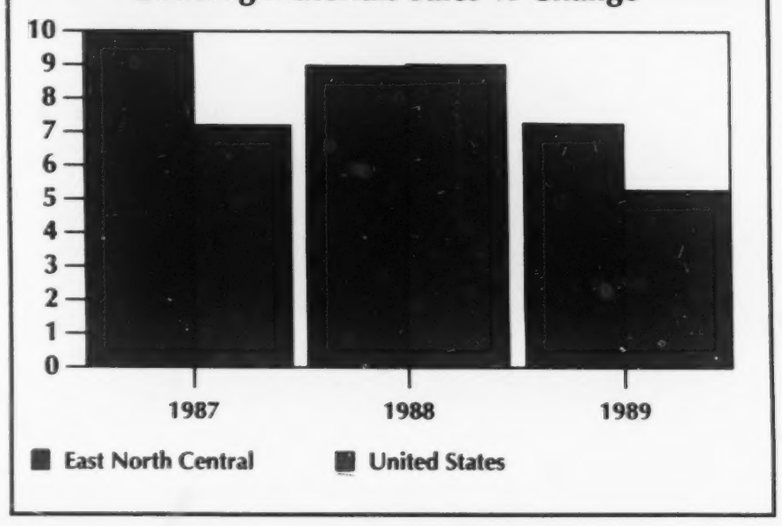
Strength in capital spending . . .



. . .and gains in resales . . .



. . . will keep East North Central market strong in '89



Capital spending will lift industry sales in East N. Central states

By Richard E. Mount
Special to NHCN

Building material sales in the East North Central states will increase 7.1 percent in 1989, faster than the 5.2 percent national average. Adjusted for expected price increases, the regional gain will be 2.9 percent. This would be in contrast to 1988 when East North Central sales rose 8.9 percent, in line with the 9 percent national advance.

Richard E. Mount

Capital spending will again be the driving force behind the region's economy. National capital spending increased 10.3 percent in 1988, and current surveys for 1989 suggest a further gain of 9.1 percent. This 9.1 percent gain for 1989 investment spending intentions is up from the previous estimate of 6 percent made at year-end 1988.

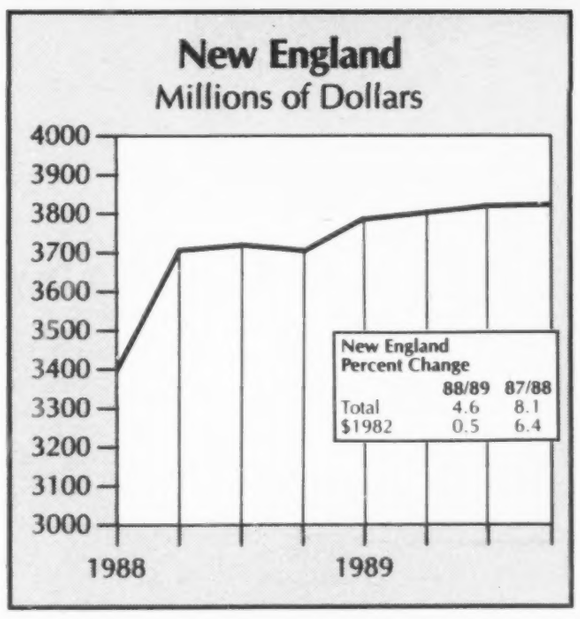
Some analysts are concerned about the slowdown in manufacturers' new orders and shipments in recent months in what they herald to be a weakening in the economy. However, excluding defense-related items, shipments are 10.8 percent higher than a year ago and unfilled orders 18.1 percent.

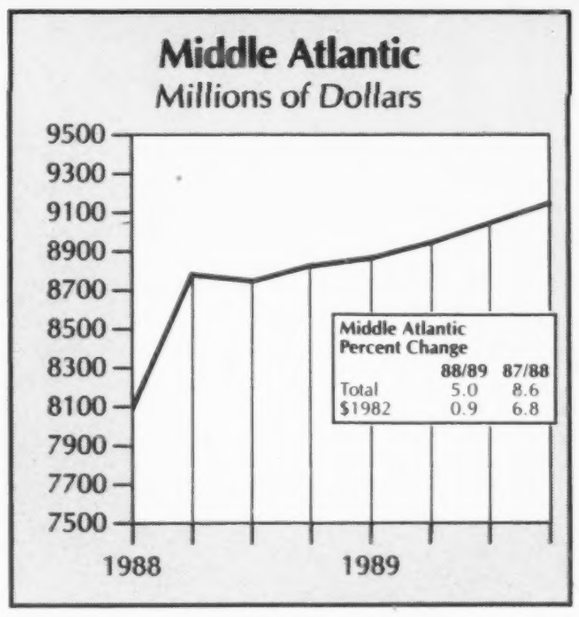
As corporations continue to experience increased capacity constraints, as output rises, balanced against higher interest rates and fears of a business slowdown, they are opting to increase investment rather than retrench. This higher level of investment will spur the national economy and the East North Central region, in particular, boosting retail building material sales.

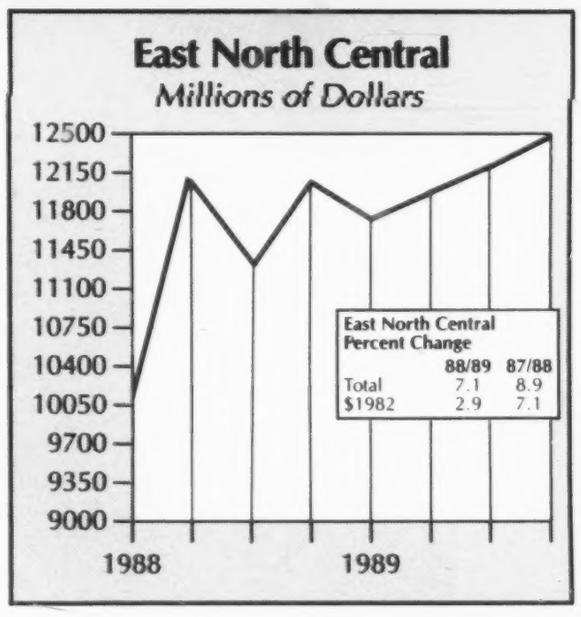
Resale activity also points to East North Central strength. Resales are the best leading indicator of future building material sales activity. In the latest three quarters, resales in the East North Central region are up 6 percent from the prior three quarters. The rest of the country, however, is up only 3.3 percent.

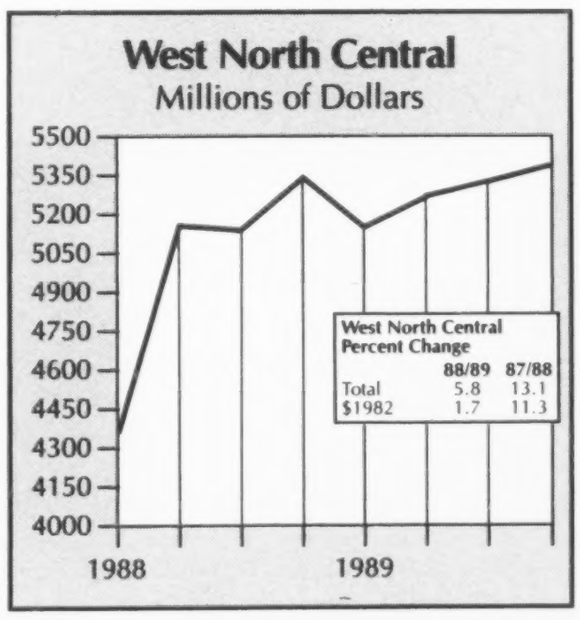
Richard Mount is president and chief economist with Mount Economic Consulting.

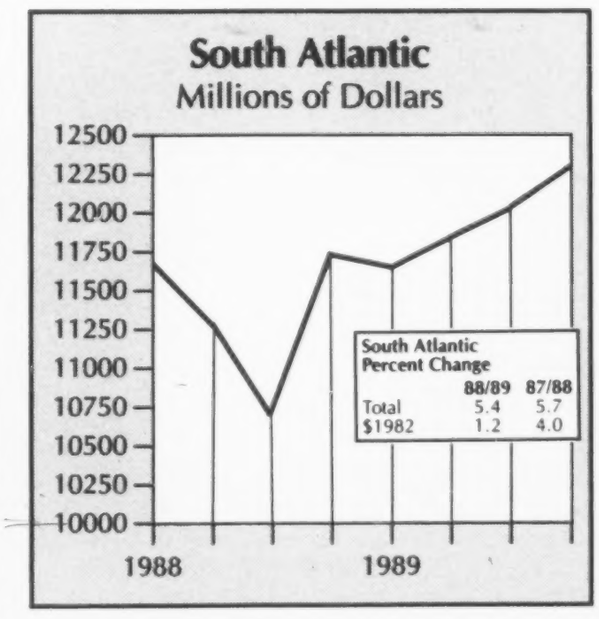
Regional Outlook: Building Material Sales

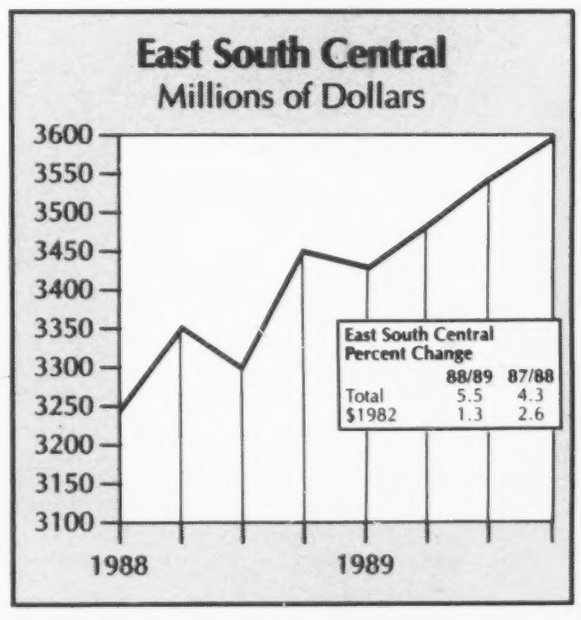


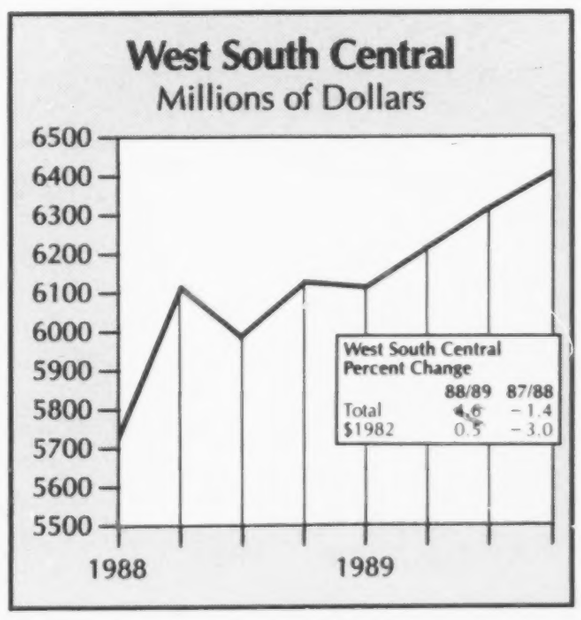


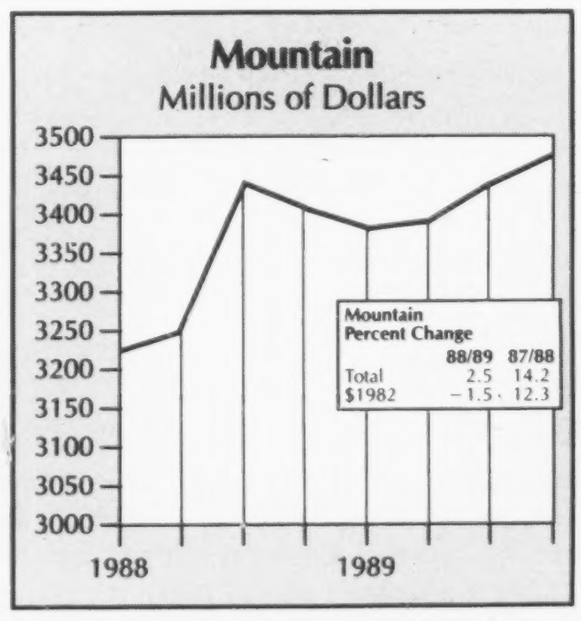


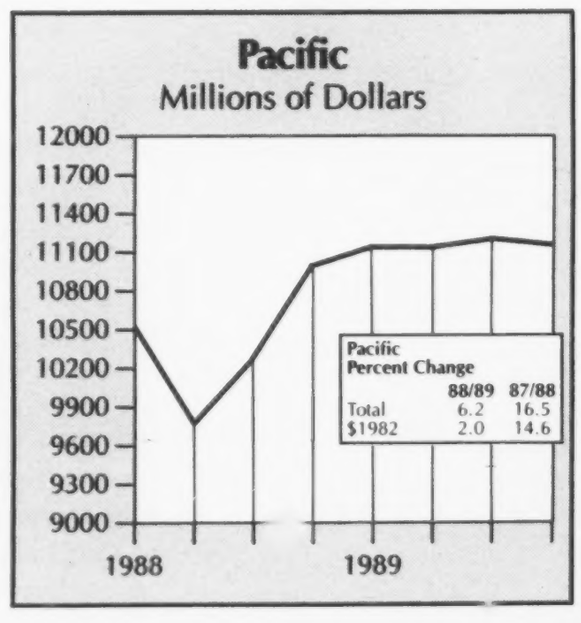












Data: Dept. of Commerce
Bureau of Labor Statistics
National Association of Realtors
Dept. of Housing and Urban Development

The Home Center Industry Outlook runs in two parts, one each month. The first part includes latest data on the General Economic Outlook; Residential Alterations & Repairs; and Retail Trade Activity. The second part includes latest data on regional building material and supply store sales.

SAAR—Seasonally Adjusted Annual Rate
p—projection
NHCN chart

Retailer liability expands under OSHA hazard rules

By Deane Evans

WASHINGTON — Home center chains will be required to provide special training for employees who handle merchandise containing potentially hazardous chemicals, according to the latest interpretation of new Federal "hazard communication" rules.

Even items such as pesticides, fertilizers and cleansing agents stocked in sealed containers for resale to consumers will trigger the new workplace disclosure and training rules, according to Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) officials.

The primary focus of this rule is to ensure that employers provide safety information and training to all workers who use hazardous substances in the workplace. Originally, home center industry leaders assumed that retailers who only stock these chemicals for resale would be exempt from those requirements.

At a meeting with OSHA late last year, National Retail Hardware Association and Home Center Institute managing director David W. Loving said "we are under the impression that in the revised ruling . . . the standard will exempt retailers from maintaining MSDSs [material safety data sheets] for consumer products in a workplace where hazardous substances are merely handled in unopened containers."

According to NRHA vice president Hal Marsolais, during that December meeting OSHA confirmed that the agency "was willing to exempt" retailers from MSDS requirements for consumer goods in sealed containers.

Retailer liability expands

However, in a recent interview with *NHCN*, OSHA officials made it clear that retailers are specifically required to maintain any manufacturer-provided MSDSs and provide "emergency exposure" training for stockroom workers and other employees who handle merchandise containing hazardous substances.

In addition, they said that retailers and other distributors must obtain MSDSs not automatically provided by manufacturers if employees request them.

Significantly, OSHA told *NHCN* that even if the manufacturer does not provide safety data sheets, the retailer will be held responsible for identifying potentially hazardous products through label information and will be expected to train affected workers.

> "[OSHA] was willing to exempt retailers from MSDS requirements for consumer goods in sealed containers."
>
> —**Hal Marsolais,** *vice president, NRHA*

A separate provision of the standard of particular concern to the home center industry requires retailers to pass on hazardous product safety data sheets to "downstream" employers, including commercial accounts (*e.g.* small contractors who purchase supplies at home centers).

According to NRHA leaders, the average home center stocks more than 3,000 products containing ingredients considered hazardous under the OSHA standard. And since every home center has "commercial" customers, each store would therefore be obliged to maintain and pass on MSDSs on more than 3,000 products, they said.

Charging that OSHA seriously "underestimated the potential administrative and financial burden of its rule on the nonmanufacturing sector," industry officials said the regulation will cost home centers $120 million the first year.

General worksheet sought

NRHA's Marsolais said home center officials are negotiating with OSHA to develop a "generic MSDS" such as a general pamphlet for each of the five hazard categories, which could be provided to commercial customers to satisfy OSHA safety data requirements.

Under other provisions of the broad-based standard, all employers are required to maintain and pass on MSDSs to workers, provide a written hazard communication plan and train employees about products containing hazardous chemicals which they will use on the job.

A separate provision which may ease the compliance burden for employers exempts "consumer products" such as cleaning materials which are used "in a duration and frequency of exposure which is not greater than exposures experienced by consumers" in normal use.

Nevertheless, prudent home center operators should follow hazard communication requirements for these materials because industry use of such products may well involve greater exposure levels than household use, according to OSHA.

For example, agency officials said, an employer might not need to provide a safety data sheet for a can of cleanser used to clean the sink in an employee restroom. However, the employer should provide an MSDS if the product "is used in large quantities" to clean equipment.

OSHA is already inspecting workplaces for compliance with new Federal rules, but is still accepting comments on the regulations. The agency is expected to amend the rules this summer.

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